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Ina Batzke, Eric C. Erbacher, Linda M. Hess, and Corinna Lenhardt, eds. Exploring the Fantastic: Genre, Ideology, and Popular Culture. Transcript Verlag, 2018.

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Abstract

Review of Ina Batzke, Eric C. Erbacher, Linda M. Hess, and Corinna Lenhardt, eds. *Exploring the Fantastic: Genre, Ideology, and Popular Culture*. Transcript Verlag, 2018. 294 pp.

Keywords

Fantastic

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This eclectic study has strengths. The fantastic needed revisiting and the great merit of this collection is to demonstrate that the genre continues to be a dynamic field of research in literary studies and beyond when read through the lenses of social change, urban studies, women and gender issues, and popular culture. With this collection, readers will learn something new about the ramifications and themes of the fantastic such as non-monogamous relationships, Christian post-apocalyptic narratives, utopian societies, African science fiction, even monster porn.

What the texts under analysis do rather than what they are is really what makes the collection relevant. Many of the featured authors read fiction as a vector for, or a manifestation of, social change. They also bring to the conversation new themes and new media that, when analyzed in conjunction with their fantastic connections, raise questions and open paths for research unusual in academe, such as romance novels and internet memes. Larissa Lai's piece on insurgent utopias, to which I will come back, is a good example. Also of interest is the notion of "organic fantasy" developed by Johanna Pundt in her article about the African science fiction novel *Lagoon* by Nnedi Okorafor. Her approach further blurs the boundaries between different types of alternative realities that the collection strives to explore and offers an applicable approach to fantasy when it incorporates elements of science fiction (two genres that should not be confused but that can be combined) in the postcolonial African context. Considered all together, the articles presented here demonstrate how the fantastic or fantasy is concerned with both "re-enchanting the familiar" (Pundt 167) and challenging literary, social, and sexual norms.

The first part of the collection offers productive new approaches to the definition of the fantastic as well as, in the case of the third piece by Irina Golovacheva, a useful review of what has been said so far. The fourth and last article by Lai, mentioned above, seems out of place as the author does not discuss the genre of the fantastic but instead advocates for "insurgent utopias." It would have found a better home in the second part of the collection "Ideology." When it comes to (re)defining the genre for today's context, nothing new emerges. The fantastic remains the genre of liminality, estrangement, the uncanny, with close proximity to fantasy, magical realism, utopia, and science fiction. In the second and third parts of the collection, however, they all get mixed up.

It is also important to note that there is much confusion between the fantastic and fantasy throughout the collection, and these terms are at times used interchangeably. This confusion, I believe, emerges out of the "everything goes" approach of the editors while the fantastic refers specifically to the eruption, in an

otherwise ordinary setting, of an illogical phenomenon whose presence, much like the novum in science fiction, provokes a shift in the readers' cognitive approach to the story that forces them (as well as the characters) to reroute their understanding of the text's diegetic world. In other words, as explained in the *Guide des genres et sous-genres de l'imaginaire* ('Guide to the Genres and Sub-Genres of The Imaginary') the fantastic confronts rational characters with the sudden appearance in their lives of something irrational (11).¹ It is not the case in fantasy where the overall fictional context or universe is irrational. Some, including myself, would cringe at the idea of confusing science fiction with the fantastic even though, as narrative devices, they can be used conjointly in the same story. Science fiction creates an entire story-world where fantastic elements are defined as such only in relation to the established science fictive context—not our empirical world. Fantastic stories keep us grounded in a recognizable empirical reality where the uncanny, the strange, or the monstrous materializes. It is this central counterpoint that makes the fantastic unique as a literary genre.

Regardless of its weaknesses, I suggest reading the entire collection to get a broader sense of what the fantastic means to others and to learn about new texts, new readings, new ramifications in alternative reality literature that matter in the twenty-first century with regard to women's rights, immigration, internet phenomena, and human desires.

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¹ Apophis. *Guide des genres et sous-genres de l'imaginaire*. Albin Michel Imaginaire, 2018. Epub version on www.albin-michel-imaginaire.fr.